

Lectures and writings

by

JOHN CAGE

Many of my performances with Merce Cunningham and Dance Company are given in academic situations. Now and then the director of the concert series asks for an introductory talk. The following remarks were written for audiences in St. Louis and at Principia College in the autumn of 1956. Then a few months later, in January 1957, they appeared in Dance Observer.

In This Day . . .

In this day of TV-darkened homes, a live performance has become something of a rarity, so much so that Aaron Copland recently said a concert is a thing of the past. Nevertheless, I would like to say a few words regarding the new direction taken by our company of dancers and musicians.

Though some of the dances and music are easily enjoyed, others are perplexing to certain people, for they do not unfold along conventional lines. For one thing, there is an independence of the music and dance, which, if one closely observes, is present also in the seemingly usual works. This independence follows from Mr. Cunningham's faith, which I share, that the support of the dance is not to be found in the music but in the dancer himself, on his own two legs, that is, and occasionally on a single one.

Likewise the music sometimes consists of single sounds or groups of sounds which are not supported by harmonies but resound within a space of silence. From this independence of music and dance a rhythm results which is not that of horses' hoofs or other regular beats but which reminds us of a multiplicity of events in time and space--stars, for instance, in the sky, or activities on earth viewed from the air.

We are not, in these dances and music, saying something. We are simple-minded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather doing something. The meaning of what we do is determined by each one who sees and hears it. At a recent performance of ours at Cornell College in Iowa, a student turned to a teacher and said, "What does it mean?" The teacher's reply was, "Relax, there are no symbols here to confuse you. Enjoy yourself !" I may add there are no stories and no

psychological problems. There is simply an activity of movement, sound, and light. The costumes are all simple in order that you may see the movement.

The movement is the movement of the body. It is here that Mr. Cunningham focuses his choreographic attention, not on the facial muscles. In daily life people customarily observe faces and hand gestures, translating what they see into psychological terms. Here, however, we are in the presence of a dance which utilizes the entire body, requiring for its enjoyment the use of your faculty of kinesthetic sympathy. It is this faculty we employ when, seeing the flight of birds, we ourselves, by identification, fly up, glide, and soar.

The activity of movement, sound, and light, we believe, is expressive, but what it expresses is determined by each one of you--who is right, as Pirandello's title has it, if he thinks he is.

The novelty of our work derives therefore from our having moved away from simply private human concerns towards the world of nature and society of which all of us are a part. Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in

creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.

When Vera Williams first noticed that I was interested in wild mushrooms, she told her children not to touch any of them because they were all deadly poisonous. A few days later she bought a steak at Martino's and decided to serve it smothered with mushrooms. When she started to cook the mushrooms, the children all stopped whatever they were doing and watched her attentively. When she served dinner, they all burst into tears.

One day I went to the dentist. Over the radio they said it was the hottest day of the year. However, I was wearing a jacket, because going to a doctor has always struck me as a somewhat formal occasion. In the midst of his work, Dr. Heyman stopped and said, "Why don't you take your jacket off?" I said, "I have a hole in my shirt and that's why I have my jacket on." He said, "Well, I have a hole in my sock, and, if you like, I'll take my shoes off."

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This piece appeared in Dance Magazine, November 1957. The two pages were given me in dummy form by the editors. The number of words was given by chance operations. Imperfections in the sheets of paper upon which I worked gave the position in space of the fragments of text. That position is different in this printing, for it is the result of working on two other sheets of paper, of another size and having their own differently placed imperfections.

2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance

To obtain the value
of a sound, a movement,
measure from zero. (Pay
attention to what it is,
just as it is.)
A bird flies.

Slavery is abolished.

the woods

A sound has no legs to stand on.

The word is teeming: anything can happen.

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movement

sound

points in
time, in
space

love
mirth

the heroic
wonder

Activities which are different
happen in a time which is a space:
are each central, original.

The emotions

tranquillity
fear
anger
sorrow
disgust

are in the audience.

The telephone rings.

Each person is in the best seat.

War begins at any moment.

Each now is the time, the space.

lights

inaction?

are eyes open?

Where the bird flies, fly.

ears?